

Designing with Children

St. Augustine's Catholic Primary School

After the completion of new building at St. Augustine's School, Gateshead, staff wanted to create an open space structure as a vehicle to promote pupils' creative thinking. The aim was to develop a flexible space that would adapt to children's curriculum and learning needs. Three Key Stage 1 classes were involved in the planning and design of the den for three months.

The project was in-part supported by a CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) education grant. Other CABE education grant projects include, for example, the creation of a sculpture project, Frank Barnes School for Deaf Children, London; and the construction of an outdoor eco play-house, Pewley Down Infant School, Guilford.

Motivation

The learning-focused vision of CABE informed St. Augustine's project. The development of the den was thus linked to various aspects of the curriculum, such as Maths, PSHE, science, DT and ICT. Students were offered opportunities to develop skills in data handling, speaking and listening, making presentations, evaluating designs and team-working.

Children's involvement

The six activities that developed as part of the project were mainly teaching and learning activities:

– **activity 1: initial ideas.** Children were asked to think about the empty space outside their classrooms – what would they like it to be used for? After their idea to design a den was received positively by the school, they were asked to explain how they would use it;

– **activity 2: visits and research.** Children then began to think about the materials that they would use. They explored photographs of local landmarks and went on inspirational field trips to three local buildings: the Sage Gateshead, the new Central Library, Newcastle

What

A den on the school grounds as a vehicle to enhance children's creative thinking

Where

Gateshead, United Kingdom

Age

5-7

Group Size

3 Key Stage 1 classes

Project Stage

Brief, Construction, Design Development, In Use, Technical Design

Children's Roles

(Co) Designers, Builders

Timescale

January–March 2010

Partners

CABE (Initiator)

Pupils from 3 Key Stage 1 classes, St. Augustine's School (Participants)

and Newcastle's Castle Keep, where they familiarised themselves with model-making. During science lessons children also learned about materials and their properties, which was further supported through independent research;

– **activity 3: architects workshop.** The participating pupils attended a workshop facilitated by architects at their school and through use of illustrated plans and technical drawings they learned about the job of an architect;

– **activity 4: site survey.** Children then engaged in group-work, measuring the site with the help of trundle wheels;

– **activity 5: model-making and exhibition.** Thanks to their new knowledge and experiences children then improved their designs and made necessary changes. They also created a model of their den. Each child voted for the top three designs in each class. The winning models were exhibited along with other plans and mood boards in the school hall, which was open to the entire school, including the parents of Key Stage 1 pupils. The top three designs were then used by an architect who built the den. The exhibition generated an overall sense of pride, as a Year 2 student explained: *'I liked seeing all of the models in the exhibition that KS2 came to. We were very pleased with our work and everyone was very impressed!'*; and

– **activity 6: den-building.** This part of the project proved the most enjoyable for the children involved: they spent time with the builders outside in all weather and had an active, hands-on engagement in the den construction. As one of the pupils exclaimed: *'I really enjoyed helping the builders build our den!'*.

Outputs and outcomes

The den developed as a flexible wooden structure for role play and creative projects in the school's outdoor area. In the summer term it would be used as a lighthouse as part of students' electricity topic and then as a beach hut, this time as part of their seaside project.

Besides the structure itself, the children involved were reported to have learned new skills and knowledge about the design and building process. They improved their team-working skills and developed ownership of the den thanks to their active involvement. The cross-curricular links made also meant that the learning received was embedded in their formal, classroom learning. The young participants, as well as their families, had a real sense of pride in pupils' achievements. The KS1 phase leader observed a changed attitude to participation through this initiative: *'Some of the boys who are hard to engage have been really keen on this project – even asking to do more work!'*. Finally, the project appears to have sparked-off additional activity, with children going on to design a garden to surround the den.

Resources

Broderick, L. (2010) 'CABE education grant 2009-10 case study: St. Augustine's Catholic Primary School, Gateshead', London: CABE. Online. Available: <http://www.engagingplaces.org.uk/news/art78786> (accessed 22 August 2013).





Initial den structure, St. Augustine's Catholic Primary School, Gateshead. Courtesy: St. Augustine's Catholic Primary School.